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# PRESERVE THE LIGHT THAT ENLIGHTENS: A NEW ITALIAN TRANSLATION FOR SCHELER'S *FORMALISM*

1.  
Translating a  
Charming Mind's  
Masterpiece

Esistono viventi che non raggiungono mai la maturità di una persona, peraltro sempre precaria ed esposta a ogni possibile illusione. Esistono individui umani che pensano d'essere persone e magari si sbagliano. Ne esistono altri che non vogliono diventarlo, non intendono crescere; altri ancora, che non hanno la possibilità di farlo come vorrebbero, che non possono formarsi perché non godono di determinati diritti e beni, e tra i beni, nemmeno di quelli comuni, perché non possono respirare e sono costretti a vivere in spazi ristretti, in condizioni disagiate dal punto di vista economico-materiale e assiologico.<sup>1</sup>

Through luminous phrases like these, Roberta Guccinelli<sup>2</sup> - author of the long process of re-translation of the masterpiece of Max Scheler, *Il Formalismo nell'etica e l'etica materiale dei valori*<sup>3</sup> (*Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values*) - captures, in her introductory essay to the great work of phenomenological ethics published in two parts (1913, 1916) in Husserl's *Jahrbuch*, one of the most valuable core of the text: the phenomenological perspective on personal identity. *Formalism* is in fact a monumental attempt to think the person in her relationship with the universe of values, an attempt to think how the person becomes or does not become herself through encounters and clashes with the demands posed by reality: reacting to the positive or negative qualities of the things, taking position for or against certain axiological situations, accepting or rejecting experiences, encounters, relationships.

In this fundamental but not well known book, Scheler explores some issues previously discussed in his works, such as the problem of the relationship between knowledge and the forms of culture, and also refers to issues that he will develop in his later works, like the problem of intersubjective knowledge, which is today one of the main issues of the research on Social

1 R. Guccinelli, Introductory essay to M. Scheler, *Il formalismo nell'etica e l'etica materiale dei valori*, edited by R. Guccinelli, Bompiani, Milano 2013, p. XXIX.

2 Roberta Guccinelli (Lucca 1969) received her PhD in Philosophy at the University of Geneva and she has taught and researched at the University of Geneva and the University Vita-Salute San Raffaele in Milan. Translator of A. Pfänder and J. Hersch, she published, among others, *La forma del fare. Estetica e ontologia in Jeanne Hersch*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan 2007.

3 The new translation also presents the original text, taken from the last German edition: Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus* (1927<sup>3</sup>), Mit einem Anhang von Maria Scheler, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. II., Studienausgabe, 8. Aufl., Nach der 7. durchges. U. verb. Aufl. 2000, hrsg. v. M. Frings, Bouvier Verlag, Bonn 2009.

Cognition. *Formalism* is a research full of original ideas and insights that leads the reader directly to the heart of the phenomenological ethics: Husserl and Scheler have both created a theoretical proposal that reject the main directions of modern ethics: Utilitarian Consequentialism (Empirism) and Kantian Deontology. At the centre of the phenomenological attempts of these authors to re-establish the practical thinking there are value judgment and axiological experience, conceived as an experience of reality. *Formalism* is perhaps the most important and systematic work that deepens this kind of approach, which has always been a marginal approach in the history of moral philosophy. But the importance of Scheler's masterpiece is not just limited to the role that it plays in the history of the phenomenological movement: *Formalism* is a work of great relevance for the contemporary debate, and the same goes for many other author's works. Born from a very dynamic reflection, sensitive to the urgent needs of his time, Scheler's work take us back to the first twenty years of the past century in Germany – 10s and 20s. Those years were a kind of laboratory of the most innovative trends in contemporary philosophical thought. By going back to that time we can discover 'seeds of thought', auroral philosophical directions that are particularly fruitful and interesting for the contemporary debate. This happens with *The Nature of Sympathy* and also with *Formalism*. Today analytic philosophy interacts closely with the most rigorous phenomenological works, especially in the new research in Philosophy of mind, Cognitive Science, Social Ontology and Social Cognition (and Scheler is precisely one of the author most widely used for this dialogue<sup>4</sup>), as if the phenomenology places itself as a field of recomposition of the historic separation between analytic and continental philosophy. We can define *Formalism*, as Roberta Guccinelli does, as a huge and inspiring "libro dell'esperienza", a handbook on our moral experience: on the richness of value qualities and the ways to feel or not to feel them (the ways of 'affective cognition'). It's a work that places the individual at the centre of its investigation without trapping him in a fixed, rigid, monolithic system: the perspective of *Formalism* takes care of all the fragility, the 'holes', the gaps of existence, which is always in danger of failing, of losing reality. According to Scheler, the process to become a person is an uncertain, delicate, unpredictable process.

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4 Cfr. S. Gallagher, D. Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*, Routledge 2008.

2.  
Scheler, Italy  
and the Italian  
Language: Time  
for Reconciliation

*Formalism* had already been translated in Italian but it needed a new translation. Why? Because the previous translation<sup>5</sup> was almost unusable: it didn't take enough care of the specificity of the phenomenological language and therefore it couldn't 'sink' into the deep meaning of Scheler's theses, enclosing them in categories taken from other sources or misunderstanding some aspects of the analysis due to a lack of phenomenological sensitivity. Caronello's choices favored comprehension errors, unclear interpretation, burdening the reading.

The new translation by Guccinelli brings to completion a long and precious series of new Italian translations of some of the most important Max Scheler's works<sup>6</sup>: in recent years, indeed, the philosophical community has rediscovered the importance of his works on ethics, in which he reflects on practical reason in an alternative way to that of Immanuel Kant. *Formalism* is in fact the only systematic attempt of a rational foundation of practical reason, which tries to save – contrary to what Kant does – the profile of our authentic experience. These new Italian translations or re-translations, mostly done by experts in phenomenology, have the intention to bring to light the specific style of argumentation, analysis and phenomenological definition of the author. All these new translations try to be more faithful to the words, to the language of phenomenology, which is rich in semantic differentiations and stratifications, not simple but extremely rigorous, characterized by a "passion for the differences", for distinction between different kind of *phenomena*, a philosophical approach that today – not by chance – can discuss with contemporary analytic thinking, still dealing with the main issues of our lives (emotions, values, community life, and social justice).

Roberta Guccinelli's translation was really necessary to free Scheler's German from the ideological or religious interferences, which have little to do with his theses, a need that has not yet been fulfilled, instead, in the case of Italian translations of Edith Stein's works, which still remain mostly excluded from the research of the scientific community, because the language she used is not updated with current phenomenological standards and the periods are often deprived of the original meaning. Guccinelli's work on *Formalism* resembles a

5 M. Scheler, *Il formalismo nell'etica e l'etica materiale dei valori*, edited by G. Caronello, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1996.

6 For example: M. Scheler (1913, 1923), *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*; now in GW VII, pp. 9-259, Italian edition: *Essenza e forme della simpatia*, edited by L. Boella, tr. by L. Oliva and S. Soannini, Franco Angeli, Milano 2010; (1911-19) *Vorbilder und Führer*, in GW X, pp. 255-319, Italian edition: *Modelli e capi. Per un personalismo etico in sociologia e filosofia della storia*, edited by E. Caminada, with an introductory essay by G. Cusinato; Franco Angeli, Milano 2011; (1921) *Vom Ewigen im Menschen*, in GW V, Italian edition: *L'eterno nell'uomo*, edited by P. Premoli De Marchi, Bompiani, Milano 2009.

sort of *epochè* on the text, that preserve the original phenomenological spirit of Scheler's pages, the taste for the precise description, for the vividness of intuition, the passion for the word that 'says the thing', remaining within the limits of the thing itself. The aim of this new Bompiani translation is to follow the development of the rigorous analysis with philosophical and phenomenological expertise, through the volcanic and charming Scheler's writing, through his exemplifications and tireless interdisciplinary attitude. Max Scheler was indeed an intellectual of broad interests, not only philosophical but also scientific, historical, sociological, anthropological and literary. It's not simply to deal with *Formalism*: it has not been written in a unified manner, it is extremely rich in digressions and theoretical insights (sometimes not fully developed), a sort of 'yard book', the result of a special mind, able to embrace the reality in its abundance of aspects, with its many points of contrast, always picking up essential nature of the *phenomena*. It is challenging to deal with this book and its language because of the living tension between the dedication to the 'world-of-life' multiplicity and its systematic intent, which is a typical feature of the phenomenological attitude. For a long time in the Italian philosophical context Scheler's thought has been received separated from the phenomenological method and read with inappropriate categories, often Catholic categories: but Scheler attended the German Catholic circles only a few years and in any case this does not justify distortions and misrepresentations of his ideas. Italian scholars have often confined Scheler within the boundaries of Catholic traditions, hiding all the genuine potential of a very lively and original thought, full of interesting ideas for the contemporary debate. In *Formalism*, but also in his other essays, Scheler develops a phenomenological theory of value, of moral experience, which can provide us with some important tools to confront the challenges of the contemporary world: from the moral and political pluralism to the relationship between ethics and politics, from the question of foundation of normativity to the problem of education, helping us to think about the relationship between the person and the moral and political world in concrete but rigorous terms.

3. *Formalism* is divided into two major parts: the *First* one proposes a theory of value as a basis for ethics, the *Second* tries to define the person by proposing a theory of personal identity based on the theory and epistemology of values of the *First part*.  
In the *First part* Scheler criticizes, as Kant does, Utilitarianism but he also rejects Kant's Formalism and Apriorism: ethics, according to Scheler, is based on values, which can be distinguished in sensory values, vital values, personal values and values of the holy. 'Value' is a key word in Scheler's

thought, it indicates the dimension of the things that makes them important to our lives, incarnations of an infinite variety of qualities, characterized by specific traits: *polarity* (values are always positive or negative), *comparative degree* (each value is inscribed in a network of relationships of inferiority/superiority), *simplicity* and *irreducibility to goods (or evils) that support them*. Scheler's phenomenological approach to values opens up a huge field of research on the dimension of the qualifying power of language – the field of the adjectives, for example – on the effect that things have on us, the source of each moral assertion or judgment.

Scheler's theory of values aims at exploring the axiological dimension both from a *formal* – what are values, how they relate to each other, which kind of relationship they have with the things that embody them, what is the relationship between values and the moral good and evil –, and a *material* point of view – which are the levels of values and how they interact with each other, also in terms of social and historical dynamics. It's important to emphasize that Scheler's theory, while supporting the objectivity of value judgments, has nothing to do with forms of metaphysical dogmatism. Values do not overcome concrete human lives and society: they are discovered and known through encounters between people and between people and things. Values are not only a matter of individual feeling: they draw eidetic connections, they are placed in something like an objective order, because the truth (or falsehood) of the axiological configurations is not weakened, according to Scheler's perspective, by the fact that under certain cultural, social or historical conditions, it is not possible to realize that truth. Values are real – they are not mere projections – but individuals never have complete knowledge and cognition of them: they always see only some aspects, some parts, certain layers but never all. Doing so Scheler's theory tries to save itself both from ethical relativism and absolutism.

One of the most important Scheler's theoretical achievements is that he has clarified the question of justification or epistemology of value judgment: it is only through feeling, according to Scheler, that we can have access to axiological qualities. Feeling plays for the value judgments the same role that the external perception plays for statements of fact: the role of *justification* (it provides reason to recognize them as true). In this sense, Scheler's theory takes distance, for example, from the British Sentimentalism: value judgments have truth conditions, they cannot be reduced to mere subjective emotional reactions. Scheler refuses the opposition between rationality and emotional life: the emotional sensitivity has its own 'seriousness', its own laws, its *a priori* structures, which can be described, analyzed. In *Formalism* we can find a rehabilitation of emotions,

the assertion of equal dignity and autonomy of the emotional approach to the world: the organ of the emotional life – the feeling – refers to a specific level of reality and grasps it with its own proper laws.

At the centre of phenomenological ethics there is the relationship between 'right' (*richtig*) and 'just' (*gerecht*): the relationship between truth and moral adequacy, between logic and ethics<sup>7</sup>. Perception (adequate or inadequate) and preferences of value are the basis of any search for truth and every search for moral goodness: there can be no moral life if not through the direct exposure, the perceptual experience of values. The major Scheler's attempt – parallel to Husserl's one – is indeed to extend the search for knowledge, for truth, even to the field of the personal and moral life. Shedding light on the issue of emotional life, bringing a little bit of accuracy where the tradition saw only subjective tendencies and impulses: in the so-called 'chaos' of emotions, into the disorders of the heart. Taking the moral experience seriously means, in short, thinking of it as a form of authentic knowledge, which has to do with reality, with 'eidetic givenness', with parts of the world that are discovered and explored in a never-ending process. But *Formalism* is not just a theory and epistemology of value judgment. The subtitle – *A New Attempt Toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism* – makes that clear. Scheler wants to do something more ambitious: he wants to draw a 'personology', a new theory of the person, very different from the Catholic Personalism (Mounier 1949, Maritain 1947), a truly philosophical theory, not a confessional or ideological one. Scheler also rejects the Kantian concept of "person-of-reason", because that concept ultimately reduces the person to mere reason activity, to a mere will conforming to the moral law. It is important, from his perspective, to save the human being from the philosophical moves that make him anonymous, indistinguishable, which reduce his essential reality only to some parts of him, like reason or will. A good ethical theory must be able to comprehend the level of individuality: the level which includes, for example, the lucky encounters with a person or a work of art, the field of the discoveries of our own vocation, of our attempts to understand and conquer our own place in the world. Scheler's theory of the person wants to be, indeed, a theory of individuality and personal identity, which is also a very useful tool for observing the contemporary reality, to reflect on pluralism and cultural differences, to glimpse how to reconcile the respect for the fundamental rights with the right of uniqueness, of cultural and spiritual specificity. Because it is definitely a good thing that there are many orders of priority – many

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7 See also: R. De Monticelli, *Esercizi di pensiero per apprendisti filosofi*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2006.

conceptions of the good – but these differences have to live together and interact with each other.

From where do we have to start to establish a good theory on tolerance? How can we reconcile ethics with many possible *ethe*, the universal demand of good for everyone with the respect for everyone's vocation? Perhaps from Scheler's pages it is possible to start thinking about a new kind of Liberalism, a 'vocational Liberalism', different from traditional forms<sup>8</sup>. A Liberalism which is able to draw a solid foundation for human rights, while keeping alive the sense of everyone's different destination (*Bestimmung*), the fact that every person feels herself called to achieve a certain portion of good in the world, some values between those possible. Because people must be thought of in this dual node: they belong and must necessarily belong to some context – family, community, State – where they should cooperate and respect each other, but they remain individuals with their own dreams, their hopes, projects, vocations – absolutely individual and unique<sup>9</sup>. The establishment, the laws of every states must guarantee by any mean that everyone can be satisfied with his own personal identity, with the relationship between his own 'inner', emotional-axiological world, and his place in the common world, in the public world, in the world of law and legality.

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8 See especially, in the Italian edition of *Formalism*: 'La persona nei contesti etici', pp. 919-1141.

9 See also: R. De Monticelli, *Sull'idea di rinnovamento*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2013.



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